

## WHAT MEMORY IS AND IS NOT

This immortal scene of Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Gingold in the 1958 movie *Gigi* is so endearingly charming because Chevalier is so good-natured about his misremembrance.

It's often difficult, however, to be that way regarding our memories.

Understanding what memory is – and is not – can do wonders for our relationships, our self-awareness and our peace of mind.

Sitting at the table at Thanksgiving, a family member might recount a memory of an event from your childhood, talking about what you experienced as if his perception of your sentiments on the subject is a fact.

How does that make you feel? Probably at least a little annoyed. He, after all, did not have *your* memory. He had *his* memory.

You were both there in the same place at the same time, but you were having *your* experience of the event and he was having *his*. The two experiences could be worlds apart.

We've all had those arguments where one of us remembers things one way, and the other remembers it differently. For instance...

"Remember a few years ago when we were at the lake, and you fell in with all your clothes on?"

"I didn't fall in. You pushed me in!"

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

And the battle ensues to determine whose story is true.

Can you ever remember one of those arguments ending well? Such debates are fueled by a mistake: the idea that our memories are an accurate recording of facts, like a biological video

camera with unlimited storage capacity.

The question usually turns into who has a “good” memory and who has a “bad” memory. It’s a win/lose discussion, which never turns out so well – even with the best of intentions.

The truth is, it’s likely that neither is accurate. Memories are less like information from a factual data recorder and more like stories we’ve created out of our personal experiences.

They’re an amalgam of emotions, perspectives and interpretations of events. We remember the meaning we made of the events at the time. Over time, our memories change, adapting to our changing sense of self and our different perspectives. In the process, the meaning of our memories can change as well.

In the backyard of my childhood home, we had what we called “The Forest.” My memory was of a deep wooded area with massive trees. But that memory was formed when I was little. Visiting the yard as a young adult, I was surprised to find it was really just a few relatively smallish trees in an area about the size of your average garage. It was hardly the dense wilderness of my childhood recollection.

Our memories can even be totally bogus.

Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington has done extensive research into how malleable what I call our “story memories” can be. In one of her more famous studies, a number of people recalled that on a shopping trip at the age of about 5, they got lost for an extended period, cried, received aid and comfort from an elderly woman, and finally were reunited with their families.

The fascinating thing about this is... none of it ever happened.

The story was completely made up by the researchers. Relatives had been asked to write a short paragraph of three actual events from the person’s childhood, and then this fourth, phony story was included in the mix. After reading the four stories, these folks were asked if they remembered them or not. A fourth of the participants claimed that they remembered the made-up one – even though it never happened.

Loftus’ work has been a pivotal blessing in making us aware of the danger of false memories that can be encouraged by overzealous therapists or by manipulative legal teams in the courtroom.

It reminds us that while our memories are stories that contain facts, they are not *reliably* factual. This doesn’t mean there’s no reality. It’s just that our memories are malleable, and we don’t have to dig our heels in so hard when there’s a difference in what we remember.

Memories are a powerful force in our lives. They weave into stories, they give us meaning and

continuity, they allow us to carry a sense of ourselves over time, and they connect us with the people and events that have influenced and shaped us.

In ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the goddess of memory, the inventor of speech and writing, and the mother of the nine muses who brought inspiration to poets, musicians, playwrights, dancers... and even astronomers. Without memory, there can be no creativity, for there can be no story to draw from – no inspiration to create.

But the fluid quality of our memories can also be a hindrance. When we hold on to past painful memories as being precisely true, they can imprison us in the pain of a moment and bind us to that pain for a lifetime.

I've had clients who have spent decades ruminating over very specific painful memories, feeling the same pain each time they think of it and holding the memories tightly in the foreground of their experience.

There is no good that comes from this obsessive reliving of awful memories. We don't have to deny anything in order to allow past hurts to take their proper place in history.

Over time, it's healthy to allow life's hurts and disappointments to fade. But we can speed this process along by looking to other stories we remember that remind us of people who loved us, challenges we overcame and opportunities we can feel grateful for.

By actively searching for the good people, events and opportunities of our past, we color the overall tone of our memories. And we can allow their natural fluidity to heal old wounds like a tree grows its bark around an old injury.

There is also a deeper layer of memory involving *implicit* memories. These pertain to the less conscious and more automatic things we do.

Implicit memory is what allows us to remember how to ride a bike or play a sport. Our bodies remember the movements, the focus and the feeling of the actions, and we're able to dive right into it again.

Have you ever had a feeling that you recognize someone but don't remember the story of how? All you have is a gut reaction or "body sense." I don't have a story memory of visiting my grandparents in Santa Barbara. I was very little when they lived there. But when we recently drove through the neighborhood where they lived, I could "feel" that I had been there before. Those are implicit memories.

There's no story and no clear images, just a body or emotional sense.

In the case of my grandparents, they were good people and it was a good, safe, joyful feeling that I had. I felt drawn to their old neighborhood.

We can also have experiences that were hurtful or scary, in which case the associated feeling would be to move away from the place in question – even if we don't consciously know what it is we're trying to get away from. Our implicit memories are like this: very deep and, really, very primitive. They're the basis of our "gut" feelings to go toward or away from something or someone.

Understanding the fluid quality of our story memories can help us grow and strengthen from some of our painful, rigidly held stories toward more expansive, hopeful ones.

Paying attention to the subtler and deeper flow of our implicit memories can help us be more in tune to enjoy a flourishing sense of connection – or to trust our gut to avoid potential danger.

It can even make for a more enjoyable Thanksgiving.

**P.S.** My new [Master's Course in Happiness](#) is designed to help you learn the skills and habits that will help you build a flourishing life now. Jack Wheeler has this to say about this course: "I've learned so much from Dr. Joel Wade. And with his new *Master's Course*, you, too, can learn the skills to feel like you are truly flourishing. Highly recommended." Due to popular demand, I'm continuing to offer this to TTPers at a special, one-time discounted rate. Just enter promo code **MH1PROMO**.

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